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ABSTRACT

Statistics indicate that 100,000 to 500,000 children are sexually abused yearly. Changing child abuse laws, significant attention by the media, and sexual abuse prevention programs have contributed to the explosion of incest disclosures from children and adults, including college students. Studies support the prevalence of incest victims within the U.S. college student population. Incest is a nightmare that silently screams within many college students, both male and female. The symptoms include depression, low self-esteem, poor social skills, and substance abuse. When the incest remains a secret, it interferes with many of the developmental tasks faced by college students. Positive feelings about self, productive relationships with others, and healthy life skills are frequently hindered by unresolved incestuous memories. College campuses and student affairs professionals need to develop services and programs for adult incest survivors. Awareness workshops for student development and faculty should strive to develop a sensitivity for the symptoms of sexual abuse and to develop an awareness of prevention and intervention programs needed to respond to college student survivors. Sex education and awareness programs for students, especially abuse survivors, designed to foster more responsible sexual decision making behavior, would be productive. (Two case examples are included.) (ABL)

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Abstract

INCEST: A COLLEGE STUDENT NITEMARE WHICH CHALLENGES OUR BOUNDARIES

Dr. Robert Witchel

Statistics indicate that 100,000 - 500,000 children are sexually abused yearly. Changing child abuse laws, significant attention by the media, and sexual abuse prevention programs have contributed to the explosion of incest disclosures from children and adults, including college students. Studies support the prevalence of incest victims within our college student population.

Incest is a "nightmare" that silently screams within many college students, both male and female. The symptoms include depression, low self-esteem, poor social skills, and drug and alcohol abuse. When the incest remains a secret, it interferes with many of the developmental tasks faced by college students. Positive feelings about self, productive relationships with others, and healthy life skills are frequently hindered by unresolved incestuous memories.

College campuses and Student Affairs professionals need to develop services and programs for adult incest survivors to facilitate them to reach "beyond their boundaries."

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INCEST: A COLLEGE STUDENT NIGHTMARE WHICH CHALLENGES OUR BOUNDARIES

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Since the late 70's, "incest" and child sexual abuse have been a focus of attention for professionals concerned about the well-being of children. Child sexual abuse can interrupt personal development and trigger a lifetime of suffering. This paper will address the major issues of child sexual abuse as it relates to college students and how student development educators can effectively respond to this significant challenge.

Child Sexual Abuse: A Nightmare

Child sexual abuse is a sexual act imposed upon a child, by force or manipulation, where there is an imbalance in age, size, power, or knowledge. Incest is any form of sexual activity between family members - - immediate, extended, or surrogate. Incest, and other forms of child sexual abuse, is almost always suffered in silence which creates a nightmare for victims including survivors who have become college students.

Changing child abuse laws, significant attention by the media, and the creation of sexual abuse prevention and support programs have contributed to the explosion of incest disclosures from children and adults, including college students. National statistics estimate that 100,000 - 500,000 children are sexually abused yearly. Research studies have shown that one out of 4 women reports being sexually abused prior to age 13 (Gagnon, 1965); 1 out of 11 men reports being sexually abused as a child (Finkelhor, 1979); and 70 - 80% of the time the abuser is known to the child (Plummer, 84).

College Student Survivors of Sexual Abuse

More than twenty years ago, in a survey of 1,200 college females, Gagnon (1965) found that 28% reported a sexual experience with an adult before age thirteen. Only 6% of the sexually abused students recalled the event being reported to the police and for 21% the report to the interviewer was the student's first time that she had told anyone. These figures support the belief that incest, and other forms of child sexual abuse, often remains a secret which can cause personal havoc and interfere with many of the developmental tasks faced by college students. Positive feelings about self, productive relationships with others, and healthy life skills are frequently hindered by unresolved sexual abuse memories.

More recent studies (Finkelhor, 1979; Fromuth, 1986; Seidner & Calhoun, 1984) also support the prevalence of incest survivors within our college student population. Fromuth (1986) found that 22% of the 482 college women in her study "reported at least one sexually abusive relationship while they were a child" (p. 6). She found a relationship between a history of child sexual abuse and later psychological and sexual adjustment. Finkelhor's (1979) sample was drawn from six New England colleges and showed a 19% prevalence rate of child sexual abuse among women and 9% among men. Further studies are needed to examine the impact of child sexual abuse on the emotional, social, educational, and physical development of college students.

Effects of Sexual Abuse on Student Development

The effects of child sexual abuse include, depression and suicidal feelings, low self-esteem, poor social skills, severe problems with intimacy and trust, sexual problems, poor body image, guilt and shame, and drug and alcohol abuse (Sgroi 1982). A significant impact for college students is a "learned" vulnerability in relationships allowing for a susceptibility to further abusive experiences such as sexual harrassment, acquaintance rape, and abusive or "battering" relationships. These symptoms and issues represent concerns often shared by college students as they interact with student development educators in the residence hall, counseling center, health service, judicial system, alcohol prevention program, learning center, and other student development programs.

Chickering (1969) believed that identity is dependent on the preceeding vectors of competence, emotions, and autonomy, and is a springboard for the subsequent vectors of interpersonal relationships, developing purposes, and integrity. Child sexual abuse survivors may have significant difficulties with early vectors causing challenges to identity development, and problems with interpersonal relationships, purpose, and integrity. The focus on early sexuality tends to interfere with the accomplishment of the developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence.

Chickering also indicated that two important parts of identity were conceptions concerning body and appearance and the clarification of sexual identification. Sexual abuse survivors often have a self-perception of being "damaged goods" resulting from actual physical injury, pain during sexual abuse, and/or reactions from others about the abuse (Sgroi, 1982). Victims are often concerned about physical impairment, refer to themselves in derogatory terms and find themselves unappealing. "The bottom line is that child sexual abuse involves a violation of the victim's body, privacy, and rights of self-mastery and control" (Sgroi, 1982, p. 125).

In addition, sexual abuse survivors may question their sexual identity; victims may become fearful, angry, and untrusting of others who are the same sex as the perpetrator. When a male is the abuser, as is often the case, young women experience difficulties in male-female relationships, and young men question their sexual preferences, using the abuse incidents as evidence of a sexual preference for males. As a result of

a negative physical self-concept and concerns over sexual identity, the important aspects of identity as suggested by Chickering, are impaired.

The impact of sexual abuse on personality development can be examined by the "hierarchical model" of motivations proposed by Abraham Maslow (1954, 1958). The lower level needs in the human heirachy are the satisfaction of bodily needs and safety needs, and a sense of belonging. These needs must be satisfied before the "higher order" needs, such as esteem needs can be focused on by the person. Sexual abuse often controls the child, thus creating frustration in their attempts to fulfill physiological needs (e.g., bodily integrity) and safety needs (e.g., security, stability, protection) described by Maslow. The sexually abusive relationship would likely frustrate the child in their pursuit of healthy love and a sense of belonging. The lack of fulfillment of these lower level needs, creates significant challenges to the person when faced with satisfying esteem needs (e.g., independence, desire for competence and achievement, self-confidence, mastery of oneself and one's environment). Young adult college students are involved in a process of developing autonomy, seeking mature interpersonal relationships, and creating purpose - - tasks which appear to relate to Maslow's higher order needs. Survivors of child sexual abuse may need to attend to lower level needs, by repairing the damage caused by the abuse, before attempting to satisfy "high order" needs.

Further Challenges: Lack of Family Support, Drug & Sexual Problems

The family support system has been identified as a critical aspect of the student making a positive transition to college. DeCoster and Mable (1981) identify the family as one of the major factors that influence the standards and values of college students. "Family members, primarily parents, have provided many years of nurturance and are still viewed by many students as the one stable, reliable source of comfort and counsel" (DeCoster & Mable, 1981, p. 23). In addition, "...there are needs that only parental love and admiration can fulfill. The familiarity, warmth and memories that are embodied within the family itself contribute to a sense of comfort and security" (DeCoster & Mable, 1981, p. 40).

A child growing up in an incestuous family often lives a life based on fear, isolation, poor communication patterns, inadequate controls and limit setting, blurred boundaries, and an abuse of power. College student survivors have been influenced by this unhealthy lifestyle, and do not often perceive their family as a "stable, reliable source of comfort" but rather a source of pain and confusion. Henton, et.al. (1980) found an inverse relationship between availability of family support and perceived adjustment to college. The incestuous family is likely to provide weak support, raising concerns about the student's ability to adjust to the college environment.

College students often face the struggles and pressures related to decisions about sexual behavior. Sexual abuse fosters inaccurate beliefs and inappropriate behaviors resulting in unhealthy sexuality.

Finkelhor (1979) found that college student sexual abuse survivors had significantly lower levels of sexual self-esteem than their non-abused classmates. The effects of sexual abuse on students' current sexual choices can include -

- choosing an overactive or self-destructive sexual lifestyle; experiencing sex like an addiction to a drug,
- being sexually withdrawn due to fear and a lack of trust,
- an inability to say "no" and set limits; submitting to any initiation of sex
- an inability to relax and enjoy any sexual interaction
- an aversion to certain sexual acts, reminding them of the abuse.

"Coercive sex is a serious problem on college and university campuses.." (Miller & Marshall, 1987, pg 46). Twenty-seven percent of women and 16% of men indicated involvement in forced sexual intercourse while in a dating situation. Russell (1986) in a sample of community women found that "...68 percent of incest victims were victims of rape or attempted rape by a nonrelative at some time in their lives compared with 38 percent of the women in our sample who were never incestuously abused (p. 158)." Fromuth (1983) found evidence that college student women who were sexually abused prior to age 13 were especially likely to become victims of nonconsensual sexual experiences. These studies support that sexual abuse survivors are particularly vulnerable to date rape or coersive sex. Forced sexual interaction will often trigger flashbacks to the sexual abuse. This can result in responses such as, fear, rage, automatic submission, and/or an "emotional shock", where the victim blocks out the present experience as a means to survive.

Another major issue on college and university campuses is the overuse of alcohol and drugs. Chemical abuse often plays a role in the life of the sexual abuse survivor, for example (1) the abuser and other family members had problems with alcohol or other drugs, (2) alcohol was often used as a disinhibitor, allowing the abuser to disregard taboos against sexual involvement with children, and (3) the survivor's use of alcohol or other drugs as a means of coping with the pain and effects associated with the abuse. Increased availability of alcohol and other drugs on campus creates risks for the sexual abuse survivor, especially the student who has developed a pattern of overuse.

Case Study 1: Ron

Ron was sexually abused by two uncles on an ongoing basis. The abuse began when Ron was 5 and continued until age 16, when he aggressively resisted. The abuse involved fondling, mutual masturbation, and oral and anal sex. Ron is aware of 5 other extended family members who were abused. Ron describes coming to college as "the first time in my life I was free from it and I knew I couldn't be touched in that way." Ron became a "full-fledged alcohol abuser" during his freshman year and

admitted that this was his way to drown out painful memories of the childhood abuse. His alcohol abuse reduced during his sophomore year, his grades improved, and he worked two part-time jobs. Ron's dad was an alcoholic, his parents were divorced, and financial support from home was minimal.

Ron described a need to be restrained and guarded around people, not revealing too much. His anger for other males (or repressed anger towards his uncles) was bubbling below the surface and he reported incidents of rageful outbursts. His romantic relationships with women were problematic as a result of the abusive relationships which fostered confusing messages about love and trust. Ron usually ended relationships to avoid getting hurt. He shares that "when I am with someone who gives and can receive there is no problem; but when the other person is only into receiving, it's a real problem." He believes this stems from being manipulated into "giving to his uncles."

Ron experienced many fears about his sexual identity and was concerned about becoming an abuser himself but he didn't fully acknowledge these issues until he entered therapy three years after graduation. After 18 months of individual, group, and pre-marital therapy, Ron described himself as "satisfied with resolving my abuse. I can't change any of it; I can live with it, accept it and perhaps make something good out of it." Ron, now 25, is a newspaper editor, married, and a father.

Case Study 2: Sue

Sue was a victim of incest by her step-father. The abuse began at age 9, with fondling and oral stimulation. By age 11, the abuse included sexual intercourse and occurred 3 - 5 times a week. The abuse continued until Sue left for college, although it was less frequent during her senior year of high school, as she often made attempts to be out of the house. Sue never told her mother or anyone else about the abuse prior to coming to college, since her step-father threatened to kill her and her mom if Sue revealed their secret.

Sue had buried herself in her schoolwork throughout high school, never dated, had few close friends, and generally felt depressed and defeated. She had made numerous suicide attempts throughout high school, but only one friend knew about them. Coming to college was her one chance to escape, or at least she thought it would be. Sue lived by herself in an off-campus residence hall; her home was about one hour from campus. One late evening, her step-dad came to visit. He had been drinking, as was often the case, and he successfully pressured Sue into having sex with him. Sue was devastated because she believed she was finally safe from him. After he left, she was angry and depressed. She feared that the abuse was beginning all over again.

Sue's step-father continued to visit her about once a month and the cycle of abuse continued. His continued threats kept her from sharing the secret. Finally, out of desperation, she told her on-campus employer about her step-dad. She agreed to meet a with campus psychologist who specialized in sexual abuse treatment. Exposing the

history of the abuse was painful but relieving. The most important and difficult step was to meet with the police to press charges against her step-dad, and to stop the abuse. Another important step was to expose the long-term abuse to her mother and family, and manage the reactions and after-math that often comes with such an exposure. Sue has progressed in therapy and exposing the abuse to put a stop to her step-dad's behavior was a critical step in her resolution process.

A Challenge for Student Development Educators

Student development educators need to create services and programs designed to help survivors of incest and child sexual abuse. Current programs/services designed to address needs related to alcohol and drugs, eating disorders, suicide and rape prevention, sexual harrassment, abusive relationships, and human sexuality need to include an exploration of child sexual abuse. Sexual abuse survivors on college campuses need to:

1. express feelings about the sexual abuse nightmare, the abusive parent, and their family,

2. understand the sexual abuse in ways that are not destructive to their self-image,

3. reduce their sense of self-responsibility and guilt,

4. recognize the negative impact that the sexual abuse has had on their feelings about self, as well as relationships with others,

5. learn more assertive behaviors in sexual and non-sexual situations,

6. develop more appropriate ways of expressing and meeting their needs,

7. increase self-worth, and

8. learn productive life skills.

Providing sex education and awareness programs designed to foster more responsible sexual decision-making behavior would be productive for all students, but especially useful to sexual abuse survivors. It is critical to provide sexual abuse awareness programs in a variety of campus settings and to various student groups (e.g., freshman, greeks, student government, paraprofessionals). Child sexual abuse survivors' needs can challenge student development educators throughout the campus.

A significant step is to offer awareness workshops for student development staff and faculty. The objectives of these programs should be to:

1. increase awareness of incest dynamics and the prevalence of child sexual abuse survivors on campus,

2. develop a sensitivity for the symptoms of sexual abuse often expressed by college students,

3. learn to ask the question - Were you ever sexually abused as a child? and

4. develop an awareness of prevention and intervention programs needed to respond to college student survivors of sexual abuse.

College campuses and especially student development educators need to recognize how child sexual abuse challenges all of us as we attempt to go "beyond our boundaries" and "weave our future."

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